

When You Care Enough to Love the Very Best

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When You Care Enough to Love the Very Best

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Insert Standard Disclaimer Here Not my characters, not my idea, no money involved, love me for my mind, not my body. Rysher et al own MacLeod, Smokin' Joe, Anne, Amanda . . .
>

...well, the blow-up Amanda doll is mine. But that's an entirely different story all together.

>

All I own is Matt. And some loose ideas rattling around in my brain.

>

The following story, and its eventual sequels, are completely invented works of infection. Er, I mean, fiction. They are part catharsis, part whimsy, part replacement for expensive psychotherapy, and part tribute to a couple of beautiful souls, now angels, that the world is poorer for not having known longer. I've slightly rewritten some events to better suit fiction, or the time line, or myself. The emotions are real, only the characters have been changed to protect someone or another. Please send all flames, compliments, death threats, pipe bombs, requests for autographs and/or marriage proposals to me, personally. Too damned poor to have an agent.

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Drizzle.
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He paused a moment to think back. Nope. He'd never been to Seacouver when it hadn't been drizzling. Even back when this now sprawling metropolis by the sea had been nothing more than the last port before the cold northern stretches of the Pacific, with its single "street" lined by a wooden sidewalk . . . even then it had rained all the damned time, making mud the town's natural color.

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Dr. Matthew T. Brennan stepped out of the rental car and into the street, just barely damp with the mist. Turning up his collar, he moved quickly toward the antique store. He was inside before he realized something was wrong.

>

Instead of being greeted by a surprised, muscled Scot, he was being greeted by a short, balding gentleman of some kind of Middle East persuasion. The man's hand was extended in greeting, as Matt turned, slowly, disoriented, taking in the shop. Much was as he had remembered it and yet...the cozy, carefully decorated interior was definitely missing something. It took him only a moment to realize just what that something was.

>

Tessa's touch.
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"I take it that Duncan MacLeod no longer owns this shop?" Matt asked quietly.

>

The storekeeper's face fell quickly. Apparently this was a question he was asked often. "I'm afraid not," he told him. "I bought the store from an agent of Mr. MacLeod's several years ago."

>

Matt nodded slowly. "I don't suppose-"
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"That I know how to contact him?" The man shook his head, his lips pursed. "The sale occurred quickly, and it was my impression that Mr. MacLeod was anxious to be free of it. I believe it had something to do with the lady."

>

"Tessa."
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"Yes, that was her name."
>

Was. Past tense. Matt frowned, and was embarrassed at the emotions

he'd felt. A couple of years previous, he had come to Seacouver to visit with his old friend, and escape a bad time in his own life. He'd left a month later when he'd realized he was falling in love with Tessa. And before Duncan realized that he was falling in love with Tessa. Matt hadn't really considered it a weakness on his part. After all, falling in love with Tessa seemed a natural enough thing for any man to do. But she was Duncan's love. And she was mortal. Matt had long ago learned that he just wasn't strong enough to be able to allow himself to fall in love with a woman who would, far too soon, up and die on him.

>

He thanked the shopkeeper, and headed back out into the drizzle.

>

It was difficult for Matt to reconcile the fact that he hadn't just found Duncan again. After all, it had seemed like fate just a few hours before. A random collection of events had brought him to Seacouver at just this point in his life. A University of Pennsylvania neonatologist had made one bad move too many while playing racquetball with his favorite orthopedist, putting himself into a rigid knee brace and making air travel too uncomfortable to consider. A last minute call from the conference's organizers had come in to Matt's boss, the chairman of Pediatrics at the Medical College of Virginia: Did Dr. Brennan still give that lecture on triaging the Distressed Neonate? Could he be spared for a couple of days to fly to Seacouver and give the lecture during the Pediatric Emergency Medicine Conference? Sure, he could have an additional half hour to then give his pitch for Physicians without Boundaries.

>

The timing couldn't have been more perfect. Matthew Brennan had spent the past two weeks wandering, as if looking for something. Just exactly what, even he wasn't quite sure yet.

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And while he knew he'd be unlikely to find it at the conference in Seacouver, he knew he was equally as unlikely to find it in Richmond.

>

So he had gone, and now he was all alone in a strange city. He considered heading back to the hotel, but the conference had wrapped early that afternoon. He could swim some laps in the hotel's indoor pool.... except.... there'd be children there. And just the very thought of them reminded him of the patients he wasn't seeing this week. And that thought added to his rather nebulous, ill-defined sense of guilt. His mind vetoed the going-back-to-the-hotel idea and turned instead to thoughts of seeking out the only other familiar face in this city of one third of a million people.

>

A number of physicians had caught Matthew after his talk the day before to ask a question or two about details of his lecture, or to get information on PWOB. But none had had the spontaneous smile or the sparkling eyes of Anne Lindsey. And none had had that little front lock of hair that kept falling across her eyes to touch her cheek, no matter how she worked to restrain it.

>

He was a sucker for that look.

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Talking her into dinner had been surprisingly easy. And dinner had been made all the sweeter, in his opinion, by the fact that it had been at her house, with him crawling around on the floor making a fool of himself with Mary, who had giggled gratefully, while Anne fixed them some grilled chicken. He'd even been able to change Mary, and rock her while she fell asleep, and gently put her down for the night in her crib.

>

He hadn't offered, and Anne hadn't pushed for, an explanation behind the tears that had marred his eyes as he'd softly closed the door to Mary's room. He had rejoined Anne in the kitchen and helped with dishes, and shared some coffee.

>

Conversation had been easy and pleasant and varied, and the time had passed quickly. So quickly, in fact, that Matt had found himself in that "I had better find a graceful way to leave soon or she'll think I'm hoping to spend the night" phase long before he'd been expecting it. He had thanked her for the lovely evening and had delayed at the front porch just long enough to ask if she'd be by the conference the next day. Alas, she was working. But perhaps she could call him once her shift ended? He'd like that, he'd told her. He'd left her with an on-so-polite peck on the cheek.

>

So, instead of the hotel, he'd headed for the hospital. He arrived at the emergency department's entrance just in time to step directly into a maelstrom. Two busloads of day campers had collided, and the hospital was receiving the bulk of the casualties. Matt nearly ran into Anne, who was spouting orders on one patient even as she was quickly examining and triaging another. Matt simply stepped in, making himself a functioning part of the ER team, and Anne shot him a grateful half smile as she ran off, spouting even more orders at the medical student trailing her and the gurney with the bleeding eleven year old girl in the early stages of a rather impressive asthma attack.

>

Anne and Matt spent their next four hours together, quality time, triaging, calling for ortho and neuro consults, cleaning scrapes and stitching lacerations. Emergency room work is certainly not for everyone, but for those who can hack the pace, the rush of emergency medicine can be exhilarating. At least, it can be when you don't lose any patients.

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Their last patient of the afternoon was found nearly passed out in the men's bathroom. A boy of nearly sixteen, one of the junior camp counselors. He insisted that he'd waited to have his arm's deep laceration treated out of concern that the younger kids be seen first.

>

They learned the true reason for his wait when Matt lifted the

syringe, loaded with xylocaine and epi, and gently tapped the plunger, forcing a stream of local anesthetic and the solitary air bubble into the air. The boy collapsed back into the stretcher like a sack of rocks.

>

They were almost through stitching when he suddenly regained consciousness, jerking upright.

>

Bad timing. The semi-circular cutting needle pierced Matt's index finger and, at the end of its tether, ripped free. A simple gash, and not of all that much concern normally, considering the sixteen year old's relatively low risk status for HIV. Anne turned to grab the bottle of betadine but when she turned back.... The look of surprise on her face lasted only a moment before it turned to recognition. The tear in the glove was the only testament to the injury she'd seen. The skin beneath was once again whole.

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Her eyes caught Matt's, and his fear quickly abated. She knew.

>

Well then. That certainly simplified matters.

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They were walking to her car before he brought it up. "I've met others like you," was all she'd tell him, cutting off his question before it was even fully asked.. "Immortals."

>

It wasn't like Matt to push, but this _was_ the Pacific Northwest. And it _was_ Duncan MacLeod's favorite chunk of the New World. "One of those 'others' wouldn't happen to be a tall, muscular, good looking man with a heavy Scottish accent, would it?" He could tell by her careful lack of expression that it was.

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Anne faced him over the car's roof for just a moment, frowning thoughtfully, appraising him, before she climbed into the car. She had gotten to know a little about Matthew Brennan in their few short hours together. Enough to maybe trust him. A little. But not enough to trust him with Duncan's life. She didn't say anything more on the trip back to her house, and then she left him in the kitchen while she made a phone call from her bedroom. When she returned, she seemed to have reached a decision. Of sorts. "I haven't seen Duncan in quite a while." She said it almost apologetically. "We don't really keep in touch all that closely any more, and right now he's out of town. But maybe you could check at a Blues place called Joe's. Joe knows him pretty well, and some of Mac's friends hang out there sometimes." She hadn't met his eyes through the entire statement.

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At least part of what she'd told him, Matt knew, had been a lie. But he could appreciate that. Duncan MacLeod had friends who were willing to lie to protect him.

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This was, he felt, as it should be.

>

He wondered if _he_ had any friends who would be willing to lie for him.

>

From her tone it was obvious, at least to him, that Anne and Mac had history. This, to Matt, was proof positive that Tessa was dead. Mac had at times been cavalier about his relationships with women, but only a fool would leave Tessa. And Duncan MacLeod was no fool.

>

Two hours after he and Anne had left the emergency department, Matt Brennan's rental car found a parking place on an ordinary looking street in downtown Seacouver. He stared through his windshield and through the swirls of light that the misting rain helped to twist, at the colored neon sign across the street. Joe's. Simple, yet.... perfect. The perfect name for a Blues bar. After a few minutes' hesitation, he finally opened the car door and stepped out into the Seacouver night, turning up his collar as he crossed the street. He wore a long trail coat, of course, perfect to hide the katana. The katana Mac had given him. Matthew had been using an old English broadsword when Mac had first met him. The blade had been a hold over, a gift from a woman he'd loved a long time ago, specially commissioned just for him. But with his slight build and moderate height, Mac had pointed out, the katana was a much better choice. So Matt had hung up Rebecca's sword, and trusted his life to the Highlander's expertise. It had, at that point, been nearly a millennium since Matt had given much thought to his swordsmanship. His energies had been turned to other pursuits.

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It was after ten o'clock when he stepped into the bar. The Wednesday night crowd was light, which Matthew had been counting on. He knew without looking that he was the only immortal in the place. When he did look, however, there was only the bartender, a waitress, two or three couples and a gracefully aging distinguished-looking gentleman perched atop a stool on the small stage in the corner. He was getting sounds from his guitar that would make even some of the finest Blues masters jealous. Matt took a seat at a quiet table and ordered something smooth and Irish.

>

He admired the music for nearly an hour, until there was only the guitarist, the bartender and a yuppie couple left. The bartender was shining glasses, the yuppie couple was doing something Matthew didn't need elaborated upon under the long tablecloth, and the guitarist was looking lonely and, appropriately, sounding it. Matt finally ambled toward the bar to inquire about 'Joe'. The bartender looked at him as if he were carrying a sword - well, as if he were carrying a sword where it was _visible_ - and aimed his chin at the stage.

>

Oh. Dawn on the Brennan coast.

>

The glass of Irish whiskey fit nicely into the coaster on the Yamaha Electric Grand as Matt took a seat on its bench. Joe watched him with casual disinterest, his fingers beginning to pick through a tune that

was still getting air play. It was the first truly bluesy thing to hit Junk-40 in a long while. Traci Chapman or something like that? Matt usually didn't bother to keep up with the names of artists anymore. Even the good ones, the truly great ones, would only be around for thirty or forty years. What was the use?

>

But the song was soulful and strong, and it was in an easy key. Matt fired up the Korg programmable keyboard perched atop the electric grand and added a facsimile of a Hammond Leslie organ to Joe's guitar. By the second verse, Joe was nodding approvingly and even smiling a bit.

>

When it was over, he offered his hand. "Joe Dawson," he introduced himself.

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Matt accepted the hand and shook it. Clear, strong. A good sign. "Matt Brennan." There was just a hint of flicker to Joe's eyes, and Matt's grin turned crooked, to show he'd noticed it. "I take it Anne has already warned you."

>

Joe matched his wry grin and shrugged. "She has reason to be cautious."

>

Matt nodded, trying a few chords on the piano keyboard. The Yamaha sounded sweet. "Mac has even more," he added.

>

Joe made a minor tuning adjustment to his low E string. "You seem to know your way around the keys," he said.

>

Matt shrugged again. "I've had a few years of practice," he teased. He found a particular chord

and extended it all the way out. "Ever heard of an Aaron Neville tune called _Tell It Like It Is?_"

>

Joe's crooked grin again. "Yeah, I think I could manage to find the chords," he said. He leaned into his mic and took his note from Matt's chord. "If you want, something to play with, go on and buy yourself a toy...."

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It was well after 1am when Joe finally put down the guitar and Matt shut down the keyboard. Joe picked up his cane and the doctor followed him to the bar for a final belt. "Mac's out of town," Joe told him. So it was either the truth, or a lie worth retelling. "But I'll tell him you dropped by."

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Matt frowned, and nodded. "I'd appreciate that," he said.

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"You don't impress me as an immortal on a hunt."
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Matt laughed out loud, taking another sip of his Irish whiskey. "I'll take that as a compliment, Joe," he said. He drained the glass and set it on the bar. "Mac and I are old friends and, well..." His throat was surprisingly thick. "I'm just at a point in my life where it would be good to see some old friends." His eyes shone wetly when they once again found Joe's. He was forcing the smile again. "No one should understand that better than a blues artist," he said.

>

Joe's smile was kind, and sympathetic. "Speaking of which, you don't have to leave town right away, do you?"

>

Matt shrugged. "I've got no definite plans."

>

Joe was nodding. "Tomorrow night, the full band is here, but my keyboardist is out for a few days. Care to fill in?" He saw Matt's eyes drift back to the stage. "Nine o'clock tomorrow night," he told him. "Beer's free for the band."

>

Matt nodded. "I'll be here."

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>

Anne stepped into Joe's at the height of the dinner hour, finding the crowd to be fairly light. Joe's was, after all, much more renowned for its late night entertainment than for its gourmet meals.

>

She frowned at the stage, and at the performers there. Matt Brennan was at the keyboard of the electronic baby grand, playing mournfully through a piece of Queen music. Something about wanting to live forever. Next to him, on a taller stool, sat the band's bassist. She was putting a bass line under him and occasionally muttering things to him that must have been at least partly funny. He gave her an occasional crooked grin.

>

Anne shook the light drizzle from her hair and made it to the bar unnoticed by the keyboardist. "Wow, Joe," she teased him, "you're doing dinner music now? Going high class, aren't you?"

Pretty soon I'll be finding little umbrellas in my drinks."

>

Joe was careful not to look insulted. "Matt's been here most of the afternoon," he said. "Came in saying something about needing to refresh his memory on where all the keys were."

>

"And?"

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"The guy's good. He's just trying to work something out." Joe knew that mood only too well.

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"I wonder what that is." She watched as Joe poured her a coffee and leaned on the bar in front of her. "I called a guy I did my residency with," she told him, "who works at MCV now." She frowned and took an experimental sip of the coffee. "Matt works there, and the past two months he's been rotating through the neonatal intensive care unit, and, well, working in a NICU, you sort of have to get used to the idea that not everything works out okay. Burnout is prevalent among NICU docs." She looked up at Joe. "Rumor has it that Matt Brennan is burning out. He's been withdrawn and quiet lately, and had called in sick three days last week. It's the first time he's taken any sick leave in the five years he's worked there."

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"Immortals don't get sick" Joe noted. He rubbed at his beard.

>

"There's that," Anne agreed.

>

"Does he look like a burn-out to you?" Joe asked her.

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Anne shrugged. "If I could pick 'em out of a crowd that easily, Joe," she said, "I could have been a psychiatrist and made twice the money with half the work. He's definitely depressed. Do Immortals get clinical depression?"

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Joe shook his head. "The Watchers have debated that for decades, Anne," he said.

>

She turned on her barstool to face Matt again. She watched him work the keyboard, passionately, intently, nothing else in the room even registering. Even Lori's bassline was something that seemed to just be there to him.

>

The quiet soulful types were the most vulnerable, and she wanted to fold him in her arms and hide him away from whatever demons were gnawing at him. He had that effect on women. Well, at least, he had that effect on her.

>

"Well, someone's coming in tonight who just might be able to cheer him up," Joe told her. He'd placed a call first thing that morning, just after he'd called his keyboardist, Karen, to inform her of her sudden, unexpected illness.

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"Mac?" she asked, wondering if she should stay. Neither she nor Duncan quite knew what to make of their relationship right now.

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"Yeah," Joe said, moving away to serve other customers. "Him, too."

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Once the entire band kicked in, Matt's mood seemed to improve a bit. But then, how could it not? Joe purposely started with a rocking set, with Barb banging away almost fiercely on the drums, which forced the doctor's energy level to climb. He even got a smile out of him when he introduced him to the crowd as "coming all the way from Richmond, Virginia" to join Joe's house band. He worked well with the entire ensemble, in spite of his complete lack of practice time with the other musicians. That was what decades of professionalism can do for you, Joe mused.

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It was nearly midnight when he saw Matt stiffen and look to the door. The immortal keyboardist played on even as his eyes widened. Amanda Darieux had that reaction on a lot of people, but for Matthew Brennan, the reaction was intensely more personal. His smile grew and widened as Amanda's escort followed through behind her. They took a table near the band and embarrassed him by coming to their feet and shouting his name when the song ended. He rewarded them with a deep, involuntary blush. Amanda stepped onto the stage and leaned to whisper in his ear.

>

"Play something for me?" she asked simply, moving back and retaking her seat. He didn't move to dry the dampness her tongue had applied to his ear.

>

Joe nodded to him, and the band hung back, awaiting his lead. There were so many songs that would have been appropriate, but there was one in particular... The one he'd heard for the very first time on the radio the day she'd left him. The last time. It was now an "oldie." An ancient Bill Withers tune. Matt picked his key and did the first line a capella. "Ain't no sunshine when she's gone....."

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The amplifier induced headache had quieted to a dull roar and the after-smell of stale cigarettes was fading into the background of his senses. Matthew Brennan was smiling wryly, peeling the

label off his nearly empty bottle of Molsen as Duncan recounted their

trip back to the Red Cross hospital through the active minefield during World War II in France. "A _shortcut!" _he'd said, Duncan announced loudly, slapping the table as he'd said the word. Amanda was having trouble catching her breath, and was clutching at her sides in the leather dress. "I said, 'Matt, I don't think this is a good idea,' and he says, 'What are you afraid of?' and I said, 'Well, blowing up for one thing!'" Matt seemed to remember a bottle of scotch having been involved in there somehow, but he was letting Duncan recount the story, and gracefully accepting Duncan's characterization of him in the process. "So Matt here says, 'Well, just hold onto your head with one hand. You'll get back together eventually!'" Duncan took a long drought of his beer, shaking his head at the memories. "And then when we get back, he practically has to stop a fight between the nurses over which one gets to make him dinner."

>

"Cut that out!" Matt protested.

>

"No, it's true!" Duncan insisted. "It was the middle of the war in France and every man in uniform was diving into everything he could get. And here's Matthew, acting like a gentleman in crowds and a monk when alone. You found yourself a real hook in that, 'I respect you too much' angle."

>

Matt's cheeks hadn't stopped flushing since Duncan and Amanda's first standing ovation. This was such an odd turn in the spotlight for him. He was a man who enjoyed his low profile, and the gratuitous adulation was too much to bear. Yet, at the same time.... well, if there was a point in his life when this could do him some good, now was about it.

>

"That's _nothing!"_ Amanda broke in. "You should have seen all the medieval wenches practically peeing all over themselves just to get a glimpse of the dashing Robin of Loxley."

>

Joe's head came up quickly. "Robin Hood?" he asked suspiciously. His eyes narrowed on Matt, wondering if this was just another of Amanda's pranks.

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"Robin Hood was a legend," Matt said gruffly, not entirely able to suppress the guilty smile.

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"So daring and so brave," Amanda added wistfully, batting her eyelashes coyly. It was a look that drove Matt half insane - it had ever since the Middle Ages, when it _hadn't _been considered melodrama. And she knew it.

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Matt was shaking his head. "It is but a simple matter to be brave," he said quietly, sipping at his now warm beer remnants, "when an arrow through the heart can be considered little more than a minor annoyance."

>

"Did you really steal from the rich and give to the poor?" Joe pushed, teasing now. "Or can I count the disillusionment of yet another childhood idol."

>

"Oh was he ever the Prince of Thieves," Amanda teased.

>

"With some serious help," Matt added quickly. "I was nothing but Robin the Annoying Pick-Pocket before I met Amanda."

>

"Now why am I not surprised?" Duncan mused.

>

"Hey!" she protested.

>

"Not all the merry men were men," Matt added, accepting yet another slap from Amanda. She had fallen back quickly into the physical familiarity of playfully hitting and casually touching him, just as if they'd not been apart for over twenty years. It was a familiarity that after two decades of self-imposed isolation, being careful not to make close friends, felt much better than he'd expected.

>

And even much better than he'd remembered. His eyes returned to her more and more frequently.

>

He'd worked hard to put the beautiful immortal out of his mind. Each time they came together she eventually, sometimes much more often than others, grew bored and moved ever onward, leaving him to deal with the separation over and over and over again. Each time it became more difficult. Each time he promised himself that the next time they met would be different. He'd maintain his distance, remember that Amanda was one who needed more space than most, and that eventually, perhaps soon, she'd be off again, leaving him to brood for a few years, wondering what he could have done differently to keep her with him longer, and each time realizing that there was nothing he could do.

>

Amanda was Amanda, and he knew he wouldn't love her nearly so much if she weren't.

>

And she was, after all, here with him now. For now, that was good enough. It would have to be.

>

"So you're a physician again," Duncan mused, shaking his head. "How'd you like this trip through medical school? What was this? The third? Fourth? Must've been interesting, knowing all you did before you went in."

>

"This was my sixth time through," Matt corrected, his eyes gaining back a bit of their shine. "But I found that what I knew was nothing,

Duncan. Oh, how things have changed. The advances we've made in the past hundred years.... The understanding of cell receptors and how to manipulate them, and how to work with the different signaling mechanisms that make us work.... I can remember being so excited when Sulfa and Penicillin were discovered and we suddenly had two antibiotics. Now, hell I don't even know how many we've got, but I can name thirty or forty without even pausing to think. And who'd've thought that that little pipsqueak Frank Starling would have ever amounted to anything? Hell, he's got his name on a half a dozen different physiological processes. It's just..... exciting to see how far medicine has come so quickly."

>

Duncan regarded him with almost a challenging expression. "Then why," he asked, "with all those things to be excited about, did I get a call from Joe telling me you were here moping?"

>

The luster suddenly went out of Matt's voice and bearing and he deflated back into his chair. "I'm not moping," he protested. He suddenly looked very tired.

>

"I'm glad I'm not moping like you're not moping," Amanda remarked.

>

"I'M NOT MOPING!!" All three sets of eyes were pinned to him. They weren't letting him off.

Finally with a sigh he added, "Perhaps it's because no matter how much we know, how much we learn, how much we can do..... It'll always be just barely not enough for someone," he said quietly.

>

None of them had a suitable answer for that.

>

Joe finally stood and began clearing the empty bottles. Duncan joined him. "I need to call it a night," Joe said. "I have to be back here tomorrow for deliveries. You still gonna be in town tomorrow?" he asked Matt. "I'm still short a keyboardist."

>

"He'll be here," Amanda promised Joe, a mischievous smile playing across her face.

>

"I'll see you then," Mac offered, patting Matt on the shoulder. "Matthew," he said simply, honestly, "it's great to see you again."

>

Matt's smile was quick and genuine, if a bit subdued. "You too, Mac."

>

Amanda stood, pulling Matt's hand and dragging him to his feet. "Come on," she said. "Lemme show you why people fall in love here in

Seacouver like nowhere else."

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They walked for hours along the waterfront, the gentle spray of ocean mist damp against their faces, giving them chill enough to justify walking arm and arm. Matt was careful not to be amazed by the lack of rain, lest he jinx them. They had a full moon and a full skyful of stars to light their night.

>

They talked for those hours, about nothing mostly. It was time spent dipt into each other's hearts again after all these years. These were the times that Matt missed most, when Amanda didn't fret about her tough persona but instead was simply there with him. She wasn't busy being tough, and independent, and smart-assed. These times were all he remembered when he remembered her. His mind never replayed the angry and hurtful words she would come up with to make herself feel better about leaving. He never relived the pain and the emptiness that were part and parcel of the first few months without her. The psychiatrist in Matthew appreciated those little tricks his mind played on his behalf.

>

By the time dawn began to sneak up behind them they had found a comfortable spot on the pier, he dangling his foot over the gently breaking water below them, she lying on her back, her head resting comfortably in his lap. Her eyes had been closed for nearly a half hour now, and he thought her asleep until she asked the question.

"What was her name, Matthew?" Her voice was gentle, blending in with the surf.

>

He continued to lightly stroke her hair. "Who's name?" he asked, knowing full well who she meant.

>

"The one for whom your medical magic is just barely not enough?"

>

His eyes turned out to sea as he fought the unexpected burning.

"Where do you want me to start?" he asked, managing to keep it from sounding bitter. "There was Jacqueline, and Elizabet, and Monique, all in 1844 - best friends who all contracted meningitis in a small town in France. Six years earlier there had been Elizabet's father, who's hand had been lost in a farming accident. Tetanus claimed him within the week. In Boston some fifty years later there was John and Colleen and Megan and Doreen and Seamus..... I was only passing through Seacouver during the Great Flu, and I didn't even know most of those names. And then in World War II -"

>

"I mean now, Matthew," she told him softly, gently stopping him before he drove himself deeper into his self imposed pit. "What was

the name of the child that sent you off moping now?"
>

"I'm not moping!" he protested again. Her silence showed that that answer wasn't good enough, but he didn't speak to her again for nearly a full minute. Not until he was sure she could with a steady voice. "Zachary," he said. "And, in about three or four weeks, Kimberly."

>

Her hand slid up his chest and then around to cup the back of his neck. "As long as you choose to love children," she told him without reproach, "you will have to learn to face losing them. Mortals die, Matthew." It was an incredibly redundant thing to say and she knew it. "The only way to not hurt, is to not to love them, and I know Matthew Brennan too well to expect a change like that."

>

There was a sound in his chest that could have been a bitter laugh. "Thirteen day old babies are not supposed to die, Mandy," he said. To his knowledge, no one else alive had ever called her Mandy. And kept their head. "And neither are teenaged girls."

>

She closed her eyes and stifled the obscenity that threatened to rise to her lips. Why did he put himself through things like this? "No," she agreed. "They're not. But sometimes they do."

>

"Maybe that casual line just isn't good enough for me anymore," he shot back, the bitterness rising to the surface now.

>

"Then maybe you'd better find another line of work."

>

That stopped him cold. They sat in silence for a good long while, the sun gently puddling more light around them. "I've missed you," were his next words, even though it was as obvious a statement as she'd made earlier.

>

"I know," she told him.

>

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>

Matt awoke with a start, cradled in strong arms. There was a fleeting moment of panic before he realized where he was, and with whom. The arms belonged to Amanda, and that pleasantly familiar feeling against his back was the satin of her camisole. She had released her hold slightly when she'd felt him stiffen in the primal fear. "I'm sorry, Matthew," she whispered into his ear, "but you were sobbing. I figured even a tough guy like you could benefit from being held." He closed his eyes, driving from them a thin film of tears.

>

"Thank you," he managed softly.

>

"Glad it was me and not some less sensitive wench," she teased him. The teasing didn't work, so she immediately abandoned it. "A nightmare?" she asked him gently.

>

He turned onto his back, and she lifted her head to let his arm get behind her, then she placed her head on his chest. They'd dropped into his bed, exhausted, at just after 9 that morning. She'd made it clear she was willing, but he had simply folded her in his arms and enjoyed her closeness. As much as he had wanted to make love to her, he knew that he just couldn't handle another "falling in love with her- her leaving" cycle right now.

>

"A memory," he corrected. It was coming to him less and less, but still, two of three times a week, in that limbo between sleep and waking he relived Zachary's last few hours, each time wondering what they'd missed, what they'd not tried. The answer was, quite simply, nothing. Accepting that fact was turning out to be the hardest part of the entire ordeal.

>

"Sorry to wake you," he apologized.

>

She playfully shrugged. "Well, there are other ways you've awakened me that I've enjoyed more," she teased him. "Do you still peel oranges with your tongue?"

>

"Amanda," he chided her gently, stifling the chuckle.

>

"Can't blame a girl for asking." He playfully tangled with her short hair. The last time they'd been together, her hair had been long, luscious. "You were right, you know, Matthew," she said softly, the teasing tone again gone from her voice. She traced the outline of the Celtic cross tattooed into his chest.

>

"Well of course I was, Amanda," he said. "But it's good of you to admit it." She continued tracing the tattoo for nearly a minute in silence. "About what, exactly?" he finally prodded.

>

"Our last argument."

>

Oh. That. Their last argument had been the pinnacle of their disagreement. The shouting had lasted nearly an hour, with nasty words and unmeant epithets flying in both directions. Matthew, in his usual style, had tried to keep the discussion on an intellectual and civil level, but Amanda, true to her nature, had let her passion rule her. And as so often happened, her passion infected him as well. In lovemaking, that was a symbiotic arrangement. In disagreements, it

was disaster.

>

She had called him a brooding, sentimental old fool, for caring so much about a bunch of damned mortals. What had they ever done for him anyway? He had called her an unfeeling and insensitive bitch, for not caring about anyone but herself. They'd both been right, to a degree. They'd both been wrong, to an even greater degree. Either way, he had always regretted the bitch part. And he'd written to her twice to express that. And never heard back.

>

"There is rarely a right and a wrong in an argument," he argued.
"There is usually just... disagreement between two equally acceptable answers."

>

"Well," she said, not accepting his graciousness graciously, "your acceptable answer was more acceptable than mine." She lifted her head to peer into his eyes. "You know why I left, don't you? Not just that time, but all the times before?"

>

"Amanda, don't," he said.

>

She leaned up on one elbow and put a finger to his lips to silence him. "No, Matthew. I've taken so much from this relationship, let me give this, at least." His eyes showed his resignation, even as he knew she was about to go all sensitive on him. That would certainly prove to be his downfall. "I've left, Matthew, because, quite frankly, you've scared the hell out of me by loving me as you do. Every time I look into your eyes, I see that adoration you hold for me. It's the same adoration you hold for those children that you treat. It's complete, and unconditional, and so very much more than I deserve. I've not been a very good person, Matthew, especially with you. Especially to you. And yet, somehow, you've managed to always be there for me, ready and eager to take me in, and forgive me, no matter my sins against you. Do you have any idea how intimidating that is? Do you have any idea how it feels to be so... loved... that anything I do can be ignored? It feels exhilarating, Matthew. It makes me feel giddy, and it makes me feel warm and comforted. But most of all, it makes me feel guilty, because I know damned well I don't deserve it."

>

"Don't say that-

>

"Even though it's true?" She laughed softly as her eyes melted.
"Women love that tender and vulnerable thing, you know."

>

"I don't do it for that reason." His protests were growing weaker.

>

"Oh, we know that," she told him. "And that makes you all the more irresistible." She slid deep beneath the sheet and then slid up to sit on top of him. Her lips were warm and sweet and felt so right

against his as she bent low to kiss him, gently. With a smile that was half mischief and half longing, she sat up and deftly pulled the camisole over her head.

>

Even if he had had the will to resist her then, she would not have been resisted.

>

>

>

>

The room service breakfast of cheese omelettes and mimosas was long gone, and Matt was climbing out of bed for the second time. He paused, though, sitting on the edge of the bed, his eyes trailing off into the distance over the Seacouver skyline. Amanda's hands gently wound their way around him until she was pressed against his back, her lips gently nuzzling his neck. "What's wrong, Matthew?" she whispered.

>

She could almost feel his frown. "I'm.... tired," he said, finally deciding upon a word for how he

felt.

>

"I do have that effect, don't I?" she teased.

>

He couldn't help the gentle laugh. "Not that kind of tired," he corrected. "Well, not just that kind of tired." The smile faded. "I love what I do, Amanda, but lately.... it's just gotten tougher to do it."

>

"Take some time off, then," she suggested kindly.

>

"That's what I'm doing," he said. "I took a whole week for this conference."

>

She burst into laughter so suddenly it startled him. "A whole week?" she asked. "Are you sure you can afford the time?"

>

He blushed a deep red. "Well," he said, "for some of us, a week is still a long period of time."

>

"Give me a break, Matt. You've been walking this planet for nearly two millennium. Take a meaningful break. Like, say, a century or two."

>

He actually seemed to consider it. "I'd do that in a heartbeat," he said, "under one condition."

>

"And that would be?"

>

"You'd spend those two hundred years with me." He could feel her hesitation, and the brief moment of hope he'd held was gone. "I'm sorry—" he started.

>

"Don't be," she told him, her voice now soft and husky. "That's a compliment I suspect you've paid few other women."

>

He didn't answer her.

>

"I'd only end up breaking your heart again, Matthew," she said honestly.

>

He turned and took her into his arms. "Maybe I get off on that kind of thing," he teased.

>

"That could explain why you insist upon caring so much for your patients."

>

He didn't have an answer for that. "Right now," he said, "I'm having trouble caring about very much at all. One right on top of the other. I lose a patient to a bad heart and two weeks later I lose one to leukemia. I manage to pull one through meningitis only to have her die from other complications from AIDS. And sometime in the next couple of weeks, I'm going to have to say good-bye to a teenaged girl that I've fallen in love with. She's sweet, she's charming, she's beautiful... and she's the most courageous person I have ever known."

>

"And that's why you're moping?"

>

He let her have that one. "That," he agreed softly, "is why I'm moping."

>

>

>

>

>

The smoke was clearing and Joe was cleaning behind the bar at the close of yet another night. Matt and Anne were in the middle of some kind of intense discussion that Duncan and Amanda had decided early on they didn't want any part of. Dr. Lindsey had come by to check on Matt and had found, much to her relief, that she and Duncan could still have a pleasant and warm conversation. Perhaps relationship-limbo wasn't such a bad place to be after all.

>

"He worries about everyone but himself, Duncan," Amanda lamented softly, staring at Matt as he leaned against the other end of the bar.

>

"He worries about himself a little," Mac argued. "You don't live as long as he has if you don't." Mac, also, looked to his old friend, and his voice dropped even further. "Does he know about...."

>

"He has to," Amanda said. "He's too perceptive not to pick up on that kind of thing."

>

"And it doesn't bother him?"

>

"Should it?" she teased him. But she could see it was a genuine question. "Matt never questions my behavior, Duncan. Never. He's never tried to impose any kind of limits on me, even when we've been together in what he wanted to think was a monogamous relationship." She shrugged. "Scarey, isn't it?"

>

"What? That he respects you enough to not act as if he owns you?"

>

Even though she knew he was right, she still hit him. "Ow!" he protested, turning to Matt for some support. He picked up on the last word of the doctors' interrupted conversation. "Mirsa? Who's Mirsa?" he asked.

>

"MRSA," Matt corrected. "Methicillin resistant staph aureus." Duncan's stare was unwavering, but empty.

>

"It's a particularly nasty form of infection," Anne explained. "Hospitals are pretty much the only place you can find it."

>

"And alone, it's bad enough," Matt continued, "but now there are also Vancomycin resistant strains of enterococci. And we know that, in the lab at least, enterococci and staph can exchange genetic material. If they finally do that...."

>

"We'll have a very bad microbe on our hands," Anne finished. She was studying Matt's face with open curiosity. "You don't see it as rather odd," she asked, "that you, as an immortal should be so concerned with a bacteria that can't possibly harm you?"

>

Matt couldn't control his blush. "No," he said simply, "I don't."

>

Before either Duncan or Amanda could respond, the same sensation hit all three immortals. They all straightened, and turned toward the door. "Whoa, dudes!" Joe groaned at the accent. Matt's teeth clenched at the recognition. "Check this out. We've got, like, a critical mass of immortals all in one room." The muscled blond man stepped through the door and let it swing shut behind him. "Is that rad or what?"

>

"No one invited you here, Kevin," Matt said calmly. His hand was itching to loose his sword.

>

"Well, like that's the problem, Matt," Kevin told him, swaggering closer. "Like, you never call, you never write. You'd make a guy think you don't hate him anymore."

>

"I just assumed you'd take that for granted."

>

"We're closed," Joe said pointedly. Kevin afforded him a dismissing glance, and nothing else.

>

"Aaaahhh, Matt, come on, man. Two people who care for each other like we do shouldn't take their relationship for granted." He was close enough now for Matt and Anne to smell the suntan lotion.

>

"Is there a problem, Matt?" Duncan asked, stepping closer.

>

Matt held his hand out to stay him. "Nothing I can't take care of, Mac," he said evenly.

>

Kevin shrugged with a hands up gesture. "Then let's take care of it, dude!" He said. "I missed you at our appointment last month."

>

"Believe me, I wanted to meet you. But I got asked to assist in an emergency surgery. Your cephalic resection was not the most crucial procedure at that time."

>

Kevin was shaking his head. "I'm not a priority, is that it, Matt?"

>

"In a word, yes. Your insistence on fighting me dates back a couple of centuries. I didn't think a few more weeks would kill you. So to speak."

>

The smile was fading from Kevin's face. "Well, I grow tired of this game, Matthew. I want to do this thing, and have it done."

>

"Even if it means your head?" Matt asked, arching an eyebrow.

>

"I'd worry about your head if I were you." He reached into his pocket and pulled from it a small envelope. "Just to be sure you'd make it this time, I got myself a bit of insurance." He was laughing, shaking his head. "You are such a sucker, Matt," he said. "Good golly are you a sucker. I don't know why I didn't hit on this idea earlier. To hell with threatening you. I'll just start fucking with the people you care about." He looked meaningfully, tauntingly, to Amanda.

>

"Why don't you?" she challenged.

>

"Whoa! What a spitfire, Matt. She must be incredible. Always on top, I'll bet, too, huh?" He held the envelope out, but as Matt reached to take it, Kevin suddenly pulled it away. "Psyche!" he teased, laughing hysterically. It was all Amanda could do to not leap at the challenger on the spot. "The roof of the Adams Towers. In two hours. Hey! That rhymed. I'm a poet and didn't know it." He was still laughing as he dropped the envelope into Matt's hand and headed out the door.

>

"You haven't killed that waste of a quickening yet?" Amanda remarked as the door swung shut.

>

"Not yet," Matt said absently, opening the envelope. He turned it upside down and nearly gasped as its contents fell into his hand.

>

It was a single blue ribbon. "Matt, are you okay?" Anne asked, her hand on his arm. She was sure he was having a vasovagal reaction.

>

"Oh God," he moaned, reaching into his jacket for his cellular phone. It was 4am in Richmond, but that didn't matter much right now. His hands were shaking so badly, he had to sit down and steady his elbow on the bar. Amanda was beside him almost instantly, and put her hand on his shoulder. Anne was still supporting him on the other side.

"Jack!" Matt said into the phone.

>

"Dr. Brennan?" the man asked. He sounded tired, but he didn't sound as if Matt had awoken him.

>

"I'm sorry about the time," Matt said. "It's just that... I had this sudden... thought ... to check on Kimberly." Matt was nervously wrapping the blue ribbon around the fingers of his other hand.

>

"I have to say, it's really strange that you called tonight," Jack

Reynolds told him. Matt's eyes closed in fear. Kevin would suffer mightily for this.

>

"Is she, ah, gone?" Matt asked quietly.

>

"No," her father said. That was actually a surprise. So it _had _been just a threat. "But she's having a really rough night. She's asking for the morphine again." Matt nodded, even though the man across the country couldn't see him. "And she's... hallucinating again."

>

"The angels?" Twice before, both times just before the tumor had been debulked - once with surgery, once with powerful steroids, Kim had reported seeing and hearing angels. Matt wasn't convinced they were hallucinations. It was an opinion he didn't bother sharing with the consulting neurologist.

>

"Yes. At least they're not calling her." He managed the joke, despite the tears Matt could hear just behind his voice.

>

"Go ahead and re-start the decadron," Matt said. "That should buy her a little comfort by shrinking the tumor a little. Again. And go ahead and give her the morphine.. I gave you that

sheet with her maximum dose?"

>

"Yeah, I've still got it." Jack sniffed, but tried to hide it. "Is there anything else we can do?"

>

"Not tonight. If it gets really bad and won't improve with the narcotics and decadron, go ahead and go into the ER. Next week we can look at maybe getting her on a morphine pump."

>

"Okay." There was a long silence. "Ahh, how much more time you figure we've got, Doc?"

>

They'd tried everything, and everything had led nowhere. This tumor simply would not go away. It was time for Matt to quit being fuzzy in his answers. "Three weeks," he said gently. "Maybe three and a half. But... we probably only have about two more weeks where her brain will function well enough for her to know who she is."

>

Another pause. "Okay," Jack said, a strange calm to his voice now. There would be an end to his daughter's suffering.

>

"I'll be back in town in just a couple of days," Matt said. "I'll call you as soon as I get in and come out to see her, if that's okay."

>

"That'd be great. Kim would really like that."

>

"I'll call you, then."

>

"Thanks, Doc." Jack quietly cleared his throat. "Oh, one other thing," he said before Matt could hang up.

>

"Yeah?"

>

"How'd you know to call tonight? You and Kim have some kind of psychic connection or something?"

>

Matt chuckled softly, staring at the blue hair ribbon that he had managed to tie around his right wrist. One handed surgeon's knots often came in handy. "No," he said. "Nothing like that." He smiled sadly. "Her angels told me."

>

Another pause. "Oh. I see."

>

"Good night, Jack. Kiss Kimberly for me."

>

"Of course. Good night, Doc."

>

He clicked the phone off, and for a full minute, no one could bring themselves to say anything. Amanda was the first to work up her courage. "What does Kimberly have?" she asked gently.

>

"Glioblastoma multiforme," Matt said, still staring at his hand.

>

"Oh," she said. "What is that in a language that I would understand?"

>

"A brain tumor," Anne translated.

>

"The son of a bitch is using Kimberly as bait against me," Matt said softly.

>

"Let me meet him," Duncan suggested. "You're tired, Matthew, and working on Eastern time, and he's got you angry. You're not thinking clearly."

>

Matt smiled crookedly at the Highlander. "You make better excuses for me than I do," he said. "And don't think I don't appreciate the

offer. But.... it wouldn't be right. Kevin's mine."
>

"Let me go with you, then," Amanda said. She didn't sound as if the offer was negotiable.

>

Matt nodded. "That's fair."

>

Joe reached across the bar to squeeze his arm. "Careful," he said.
"Don't lose your head. Or those fingers."

>

"I'll be back tomorrow night for my fair well performance, Joe," Matt assured him, shaking his hand. "Thanks for the job while I was in town. Just in case I don't get to thank you later."

>

"It was my pleasure."

>

Matt stood and hugged Anne. "And thank you, Dr. Lindsey," he said, "for leading me here to Joe's."

She kissed him on the cheek. "I wish you didn't have to do this."

>

"I wish that every time," he said. He turned to find Duncan.
>

"No goodbyes," the Highlander insisted. "I'll see you tomorrow.
Here."
>

Matt hesitated, but nodded. And then left with Amanda, appropriately, at his side.

>

>

>

>

Silent lightning casually splashed through the far off clouds. Matt stepped out onto the roof a full half hour early, but not early enough to beat Kevin there. "Whoa, like, my insurance policy has paid off!" Kevin called from his perch atop a cooling tower. He shook his head as Amanda also stepped from the stairwell. "Isn't there, like, some kind of rule about not interfering, dudes?" he asked.

>

"Amanda's not here to interfere," Matt told him flatly. "She's simply here to ensure that you act honorably for a change." He pulled his long trenchcoat off, releasing the katana as he did.

>

"You sure you're okay?" Amanda asked him quietly.

>

He turned to face her as she took his coat. "Always," he teased, "when you're with me." His face lost its smile. "Promise me one thing."

>

"Anything."

>

"No matter what happens, Kevin does not leave this roof."

>

"That was a given," she told him, kissing him. "But remember, as pleasant as vengeance would be, it still would be a rather poor substitute for your company, Matthew."

>

He smiled wryly, kissed her, then turned to face his challenger.

>

The katana whipped to the ready position as Kevin approached, his own sword dangling casually at his side. "It'll be good to have this over with," the younger immortal said, the California lilt gone now from his voice.

>

"I'm quite looking forward to having you off my mind," Matt agreed. He could see the attack coming, but he waited it out, using the katana to block each of the blows as he backpedaled and then turned, moving so that Kevin went on past him. Kevin was much stronger, and a good three inches taller. But he was all brawn, and no finesse. Strangely, Matthew had always done better against much stronger opponents. He merely let them tire themselves out while he continually was somewhere else when their sword blows came.

>

Kevin came at him again, and this time Matt found himself losing his balance. He got too far under one of Kevin's overhead blows and had to drop to his knees, and then roll out from under the attack, coming back to his feet and spinning to put the katana horizontal against what would have been a death blow. His challenger was laughing.

>

"Oh, but this is good sport, isn't it, Amanda?" he laughed. "And after I've carved your precious Matthew, I can enjoy the spoils of my victory."

>

Matt counterattacked, coming in low and under the ribs. He got a deep slice in against Kevin's ribcage, but was rewarded with little more than a grunt on his enemy's part. Kevin whirled and attacked furiously, backing Matt up until his back was nearly against the elevated stairwell. Matt half turned, bringing the katana up to block a particularly ferocious blow. He had to fall forward to avoid being knocked into the block wall. Once on the ground he kicked at Kevin's feet, but the other immortal had anticipated the attack and had jumped back. That gave Matt a chance to get to his feet. There was blood running down Matt's cheek. He hadn't even felt the sword catch

him.

>

They were both panting as Matt slowly circled Kevin, his sword before him, defensive. Slowly, Kevin's sword came into position against it. Almost at once, they began to move, slashing side to side in a perfectly timed attack/counterattack. Matt read the timing, then, when he felt the time to be right, he angled the katana and slashed differently while jumping quickly to the side to move out of the way of the blow he had to allow unchallenged in order to make his attack.

>

Instead of the hard clang of steel against steel, he could feel the sharp edge bite deeply into soft muscle. The look of surprise on Kevin's face was priceless. His eyes drifted downward to watch as loops of bowel sprung from his opened abdomen. Unhurried now, he fell numbly to his knees, the sword clanging uselessly at his side.

>

"I warned you to leave me alone," Matt said softly. "I _begged _you to drop the challenge." He slowly leaned the blade of his sword against the back of Kevin's neck, bent now in resignation. "But after all, in the end, there can be only one."

>

He spun, drawing back and down sharply with the razor edged sword. Kevin's head made a nauseating thudding sound as it first hit, then rolled a couple meters across, the building's roof. Matthew T. Brennan closed his eyes and braced himself for what came next.

>

He'd never told anyone this, not even Amanda:

>

He _hated _Quickenings.

>

This one began with a torrent of raw energy leaping from Kevin's headless body to catch Matt in the gut and lift him a full half meter from the rooftop. Every joint in his body was jarred raw with the force of dropping back to the surface an impossibly long moment later. Then, in quick succession he was hit, seemingly from all sides, by bolt after bolt of the unrestrainable energy. When it quit, it left him panting, exhausted, in a crumpled heap near his victim.

>

There were arms around him, holding him, comforting him, pulling him back from where ever it was his mind was wanting to go. Amanda's voice was in his ear. "Come on, Matthew. Let's go home."

>

>

>

>

When he awoke it was mid afternoon. And he was alone. Amanda had brought him back to the hotel room, she'd sat with him on the balcony overlooking the twinkling lights of the city, she'd let him share his catharsis with him, and then she'd come together with him, their lovemaking filled with the hunger and the raw energy of his Quickening, and the passion of his newly re-realized vision. When they'd tumbled into bed, with the sun peeking through the steel and granite canyons of the city, they'd both been exhausted.

>

He, apparently, more than she.

>

His eyes closed as he realized again that he was alone. The lack of her buzz in his brain was almost painful. He had broken all those promises to himself. Again.

>

In just over twenty-four hours, Amanda had managed to destroy two and a half decades of getting over her.

>

Damn. It just wasn't right for a woman to be able to have that much control over a man. But then...

>

She was, after all, Amanda.

>

>

>

>

For the last song of his last night as a Blues musician (again), Joe had allowed Matt to pick the song. The one he chose was Billy Vera's "At This Moment." It was almost too ironic that Amanda should walk in just as the song began. She had a small bag slung over her shoulder, and an expression that was probably a sad smile on her face. She had, at least, come to say goodbye. Matt had to respect that.

>

They wrapped the song, a wailing saxophone solo finishing them out, and Joe thanked everyone, and the crowd applauded long and loud. Matt shut down the Korg, and the Yamaha, and thanked the band. He headed off the stage, and accepted the fresh beer Duncan handed him.

>

"Headed back East?" the Scot asked.

>

Matt nodded, the look on his face an assortment of varying emotions. "Yes," he said. "And back to medicine. I had thought I'd lost my passion for it, but Kevin, strangely enough, helped me realize that I hadn't."

>

"I hope you never do," Anne Lindsay told him, raising her glass of wine. Matt drank to that.

>

"Nor you," he added. "There's a lot of good to be done."
>

Anne nodded, smiling. "And we all have to do that which we can. I'd like to talk to you in the spring about spending a week of my vacation with Physicians Without Borders."

>

"We'd love to have you, Anne."

>

Joe was next. "Any time you're on the West Coast," he said, extending his large, warm handshake, "I'd sure appreciate a call. I'd love to have you sit in again. Anytime."

>

"I'd like that, Joe." He stood. There was only Amanda left. The others clandestinely headed off toward the bar.

>

"So, you're flying back in the morning," she said.

>

"Early," he told her. "My plane leaves at-"

>

"Five thirty," she said. Her face was awash with emotion, something he rarely saw on her. Indecision.

>

Or perhaps it was mischief. It was so hard to tell with Amanda.

>

"Five thirty," he agreed.

>

She was chewing on her lip. "It's been great to see you again, Matthew," she said, moving closer. She looked down, at his chest. The buttons were open low enough for her to see the golden St. Luke medal that hung there. The patron saint of doctors and physicians. She'd given him that medal, sometime in the 1840's. "Better than I would have thought, even," she told him, trying a laugh.

>

He carefully kept from putting his arms around her, though he wanted desperately to. He wasn't punishing her. He was trying not to punish himself. "And seeing you again was, as always....." He searched for an appropriate word. "Bittersweet." The only one that truly fit.

>

She laughed in spite of herself, and seemed to relax visibly as she did. "Finally, Matthew," she said, "after all these years, you can bring yourself to be honest with me even when you know it should hurt me."

>

He grinned crookedly. "My gift to you," he said.

>

"The perfect size, the perfect color....." Her voice drifted off.

"Look, Matthew, I thought a lot about what you were saying. And about what I was saying, and about how things used to be...."

>

After a few moments of silence, he prompted her. "And?" he asked gently, wondering when the "Dear Matthew" speech would begin again.

>

"And... I was thinking.... Well, I've never lived in Virginia. It's got to be pretty, right? I mean, I can't promise you that I'll spend a few centuries with you like you asked. But then you -"

>

"Wouldn't expect that," he finished for her, his face relaxing into a welcomed grin. "You're honestly coming back?" he asked.

>

"Well, for now," she qualified.

>

"Honestly?"

>

"Honestly." She finally met his eyes, and her voice dropped. It was soft and gentle, and husky and, though he'd never tell anyone else, it was vulnerable. "If you'll have me."

>

_Now _he put his arms around her. "I'd be a fool not to," he told her.

>

"I don't know for how long-"

>

"And I won't ask," he said simply, again, breaking all the promises he'd made himself.

>

But, he realized, again... she was worth it. One day with Amanda was worth a decade without.

>

He cupped her cheek, and kissed her gently. "A day at a time," he said.

>

"A day at a time," she agreed."

>

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End
file.